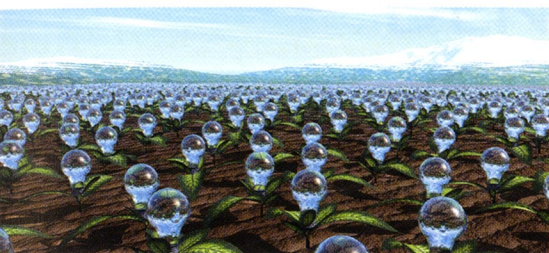




TOURISM INTELLIGENCE CORNER



Competitive intelligence, or simply common sense? Seasoned executives and experienced managers would claim that competitive intelligence is an oxymoron, and a mere figment of the imagination. Consultants would have you believe that you can 'mine and extract' value from your databases - assuming you have an integrated database of course. Scientists on the other hand often produce statistically interesting results with no business value or relevance - those numbers and graphs that no one really understands. So where does this leave us? Stranded on an empty beach? Staring at a deserted chair? Drifting without direction at the mercy of customers, competitors, and conartists? Not entirely.

TOURISM STRATEGIES, VALUES & BELIEFS

Tourism strategies reveal a destination's perception and interpretation of the competitive environment, and reflect the value premises of tourism executives and officers concerning dominant competitive issues. These value premises reside primarily in the individual and collective (albeit fragmented) beliefs and behaviors of stakeholders, embedded deeply within the destination's institutional routines and (sub-) cultures. Values and belief systems are the lenses that define destination options and strategic tourism choices within limits - executives cannot exercise unlimited discretion, due to organizational, environmental, institutional and cognitive boundaries.

COMPETITIVE BLINDNESS

Research on strategic governance and sustainable competitiveness of small-island tourism-economies reveals that tourism destinations often fail to consider the decisions and actions of key competitors, which often leads to judgmental mistakes, erroneous behaviors,

and strategic 'blind spots'. Findings suggest that competitive blind spots explain a host of tourism destination phenomena such as industry overcapacity, market saturation, service decline, and resource conflicts over environmental and economic development.

Cognitive inertia also creates competitive blind spots. Even in times of great turbulence with clear signals of tectonic shifts, executives often continue to rely on outmoded 'cognitive maps' and 'mental models' that have ceased to reflect industry realities. While executives may consider competitors past behaviors and traits, they invest little effort in anticipating and responding to likely future reactions and actions of competitors to their own decisions and actions.

COLLABORATIVE COMPETITIVE CRAFTING

Beyond all the technical hype and jargon, competitive (business) intelligence refers to a framework of *collaborative competitive crafting*, through which (a collective of) executives sense, interpret, organize and activate knowledge about competitors, customers and the environment. It is a strategic process by which executives make *common sense* of, and *respond collectively* to the market environment in which they compete.

This 'sense-and-response' praxis is a far cry away from traditional 'planning-and-control' systems (which only make sense in stable bureaucratic environments), and provides a dynamic framework for contemplating and conceptualizing strategic choices tourism destination must make as they balance the conflicting and changing demands of today's hyper-competitive, and increasingly resource-depleted environment. Research indicates that the likelihood of sustaining success increases proportionally to the quality of collaborative competitive crafting. Alternatively and more commonly, belief systems are the main constraint in developing the requisite strategic flexibility for sustainable tourism.

Collaborative competitive crafting conveys the concept of shared understanding, including shared mental models, shared thought worlds, shared frames, and enacted collective minds.

It addresses the congruency of reference frames of stakeholder constituencies involved in interdependent decision-making, and is formed when destination stakeholders enact a 'single memory', with differentiated competencies and responsibilities. Diversity is thus essential to collaborative competitive crafting in competitive environments.

DEALING WITH WICKED WILLY

Identifying acceptable solutions to ambiguously 'wicked' problems, requires the collaboration of different stakeholders, working with different paradigms, and offering different insights. This facilitates problem-recognition and solution-finding through the social - and political - integration of decisions. Studies indicate that this does not imply elaborate planning; rather, sensible and responsive tourism executives maintain a cognitive map that they can readily articulate and activate. Collaborative competitive crafting is thus inherently dynamic and complex, and is based on a model of *shared* tourism governance.

Next time you feel stranded on an empty beach, staring at a deserted chair, or drifting without direction, consider developing a *common sense* of *diversified perspectives* - how's that for an oxymoron?. Free that "wicked willy and let collective creativity - rather than paranoia, planning or paralysis - reign and guide your tourism strategy process.

To predict the future, we simply have to create it...

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